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About Albert Szent-Györgyi's Poems

I started to read Albert Szent-Györgyi's intellectual as well as emotional poetry when I was preparing for a lecture as part of the Open University programme series at the University of Szeged. Szent-Györgyi, the natural scientist, was also well-read in philosophy and in several fields of humanities. He knew the ruling ideas of the age, he read all the outstanding works of contemporary literature and the relevant research papers on them. A further research could study the intellectual relationship between Szent-Györgyi and Mihály Babits, Antal Szerb, who completed his habilitation at the University of Szeged, and others. Fundamentally, his ethical stance had very close connections with the generation of the literary-political periodical called *Nyugat* [West]. This connection was so strong that there seem to be some kind of harmony between even the sentences used by the scientist and the generation of *Nyugat*. This also brings forth the question how Szent-Györgyi was able to be so well-read in the 20th century and why philosophical literature, *humaniora studia*, was so important to him. The comparative form in Latin suggests that philosophical literature makes a human more human, brings him closer to his own ideal.

Philosophical and Ethical Issues

One of the most serious problems Szent-Györgyi's generation had to face was the crisis of the Western culture. One aspect of this crisis was the underdevelopment of human being as an ethical factor in an age when sciences advanced rapidly but without any appropriate "monitoring" mechanisms. The ethical practices of man were at the level of primeval times and a gap was widening between this ethics and rational knowledge which may pose a serious threat to the entire of humanity. Szent-Györgyi's trust in the human intellect and his emphasising the fundamental importance of the arts are apparent not only from his writings on these topics, but from his correspondence and his discussions on the theory of science. In these discussions, he often conceals important references which are not about knowing the animate or inanimate nature, but about unequivocal philosophical questions. These references and remarks appeared quite frequently in Szent-Györgyi's life although he aired his intellectual tension in different ways in the 1930s, in the years around World War II and in the 1960s, in different ways.

In photocopies, the Klebelsberg Library of the University of Szeged collected all of Szent-Györgyi's research papers not published in a separate volume. Through a chronological reading of these works, we can see the intellectual development of a moralist scholar and his sensitive response to the changes of the historical situation. Apart from incidental remarks, introductions and research papers collected in festive volume, he discussed philosophical and ethical issues systematically also in his monographs entitled *La paix, sa biologie et sa morale* and *The Crazy Ape*. While the former volume was written in French before World War II, the latter one, which expressed very similar views, was written a lot later, in a consolidated age and environment (it was published in 1970).

The characteristics of Szent-Györgyi's intellect, his response to the intellectual crisis was in perfect harmony with an approach that was represented by the generation of Nyugat. This field has not been elaborated on in the Hungarian science of literature. Professor and poet Sándor Sík became a mediator in this process, naturally. He was close to him in a geographical sense also. They both lived and worked in the same block and, presumably, they frequently met. When Szent-Györgyi was Rector of the University, the Piarist professor and colleague had the greatest impact on him. He unselfishly assisted his "boss" with his expertise in editing and dramaturgy.¹ Szent-Györgyi's commitment to *humaniora studia* can be seen in his consent to become chairman of the Hungarian–Soviet Cultural Society (in 1945). The famous writer, Lajos Zilahy, became his joint chairman. Together, they co-edited a journal. (Incidentally, the biographies of the two ran parallel at certain points in their lives.) Such a special venture was and has been quite rare not only in the Hungarian science of literature, but also in the entire Hungarian history of science. The title itself indicated the aim of providing the fields of intuitive and of rational cognition a common platform. *Irodalom és Tudomány* [Literature and Science]: the two phenomena separate and united at the same time. The first part, comprising approximately two-thirds of the journal, on nearly one hundred pages, was discussing literature, on works of art, translations and research papers. The remaining one-third of the journal was about science. The part on literature was edited by Lajos Zilahy. (Ildikó Tasi Csúcs, working in Klebelsberg Library, is conducting a comprehensive study of the published issues and the history of the journal. For further information, see her research paper published in the present volume.)

¹ This assistance was also expressed in the professional support of the university's acting company. As a result, a dramatic historical performance of Hamlet, the "Hamlet of Szeged" could appear on stage directed by István Horváth, Jr.

Szent-Györgyi saw ethics, science and culture as interdependent phenomena. He saw them as separate realisations, separate aspects of a deeper, common unity or of essence. He wrote about this in the programme paper of the part of the journal he edited. He published it in August 1945, in the first issue of the journal. In his words: “*All three areas are seeking the truth in different forms. Each of them teaches us that we should seek the truth, and not to try to justify our truth; all three areas are communications of divine wisdom.*”

Intellectual completeness can be desired for only by someone who is highly intellectual, who has tried multiple ways of thinking, who analyses the ethical relevance of actions from several aspects and who is full of emotions. Being a narrow specialist is a very sad phenomenon. Someone who is trained only in one area is an intellectual proletarian, as Szent-Györgyi quotes, *homo unius libri* (timeo). One, whose one-sided, polarised views shall be feared. The three areas of ethics, science and culture collectively form divine wisdom through which one can gain firm knowledge. “The only aim of natural sciences is to know the deepest truths, the deepest wisdom, to experience God.” And God is Being itself. Szent-Györgyi wrote about this as follows: “Therefore, nature cannot give an answer to the questions of ‘What is life?’ or ‘Does life exist?’ What natural sciences can do is to merely examine the individual phenomena of life.”² Thus, research is focused on the laws of nature, for example, oxidation, a most relevant example in this respect.

Researcher of God’s “creative power”

One is trying to understand the invisible (divine) “creative power” even if, on the surface, one seems to be analysing exclusively the substance. It was highly characteristic of Szent-Györgyi that, as father of empirical sciences, he often referred to the Italian writer, literary historian and physicist Galilei, who was considered by some as a pre-materialist, and who often said (in works cited by Szent-Györgyi as well) that we can and shall learn the world only as a creation of God. (It is a different issue that the Italian scholar, who – although only to himself – shared Dante’s ambitions, turned to oppose the church the same way as did his outstanding humanistic predecessors wishing to deepen and clarify knowledge.)

² See “From the Unity of Life to the Coequality of the Forms of Consciousness.” Worries of Albert Szent-Györgyi in Times of War.

A fundamental principle of Christian theology is that man is an analogue of God, who is continuously fighting for physical and intellectual being to find and understand God in nature, history and human soul. In a radio interview Szent-Györgyi was asked to talk about his belief in God and he replied the following: "I am not a religious [man], but I am a *pious* man. ... A religious man says 'God is this,' 'God is there,' 'God is that. Your God is not my God.' But a pious man looks up with awe and says, 'What is God?' And I'd like to know what this 'creation' really means! A pious man is really touched by the greatness of nature and of the creation."³ The scholar in constant battle with himself and the limits of knowledge cannot really avoid not connecting in a way or another with something or someone that is beyond the 'knowable.' He sings psalms as King David did once.

Especially, in the most critical moments in his life. The poems were born in the summer of 1964 in response to the serious mental crisis the scholar was going through as it was only a few months after her second wife, Márta, had died. *Psalmus Humanus* is a pious man's psalm. Its number of rows reminds us of a sonnet. It is a lonely dialogue without responses with a "hiding" God. After the initial addressing of 'My Lord!' the first part is trying to find a name for God. The question, '*Who are You?*'⁴ is followed by a series of nouns to find a name for 'You' and ends the list with question marks: 'my loving Mother,' 'my stern Father,' 'the Universe,' 'the Law which rules it [the Universe]?' We cannot get answers to the '*Why's*' either. Are we born to destruction? Did we create God or did God create us? Then the scholar-poet is seeking God's help to save him from his grave doubts. Among these, some of them are mentioned. One of them is rooted in his private life – his wish to be freed from loneliness. The other is about his social responsibility as a scholar. The lonely man is speaking with an assuring tone of his dilemma that was developing in him as a result of incomprehension.

If we consider the typology of genesis in Goethe's *Faust*, Szent-Györgyi preferred the evolutionist approach⁵ and not the 'volcanoist' that linked the beginning of life to a moment, to an eruption. Moreover, continuous advancement both by the laws of nature and by the knowledge gained about these laws is in

³ Ralph W. Moss, *Free radical: Albert Szent-Györgyi and the battle over vitamin C*. New York: Paragon House, 1988. 213.

⁴ In St. Thomas's views, the best term to refer to God is *Qui est*.

⁵ In the above-mentioned interview, he also said that, as opposed to the Bible, God did not create life from nothing with his word but life was continuously developing from the physical world itself.

contrast with the approach that both man and the world are God's finished products (even though at times, God was forced to re-construct these products). The approach or idea of development allows more room for human activity and creativity (this was Goethe's opinion too); this approach is obviously holding favourable opportunities for a creative man. To become God's 'colleague' is a highly attractive role to take especially if we imagine a superior being free from the errors that characterise us and which feature we foolishly confer to Him. Human knowledge recognising God's autonomy, i.e. aligning our activities to the absolute, may prove the most useful for a community.

The Prayers

First Prayer: God

My Lord!

You are greater than the world You created,

And Your house is the Universe.

I shaped You to my own image

Thinking You vicious, greedy and vain,

Desirous of my praise and sacrifices,

Revengeful of my petty trespasses,

Needful of the houses I build you

While my fellow men I let go without food and shelter.

God! Let me praise You by improving my corner of Your Creation

By filling this little world of mine

With light, warmth, good will and happiness.

After *Psalmus Humanus* this was the first of six prayers. The way Szent-Györgyi composed these poems is deeply interesting. Literary tradition originates in the psalms of the Bible, to which the biologist remained faithful. These are questions of a man seeking a connection with God, questions about the relationship between God, man and the world, about divine expectations, a man's duties and gnawing doubts.

The prayers can be broken down to three parts: all six begin with an assertion that are generally positive in attitude. Therefore, these initial assertions are all positive statements at the beginning of each *prayer*. Consequently, a reader may think that these introductory lines show God's real intent, the possibility of the realisation of the good in a context which cultures problems. These

are the following: The Heart and the Mind, The Leaders (our politicians and priests), Energy and Speed, Children etc. The Parent, the Universe, Love in the heart and Thought in the mind (Third Prayer), Service (of the Lord and of the man, Fourth Prayer), Science, Beauty and Children are addressed in the 'overture' of the prayers.

However, after the introduction, there is a break in each prayer; the original good intent cannot be preserved. It is as if in the creation process the light had broken up, or at least, had been unable to position well. And so, it becomes impossible to create a perfect world that aligns to the absolute. The second part of each prayer lists the negative features; this part is the place and time for evil to succeed. Human pride is behind this crisis (the greatest sin in the Middle Ages): man believes himself to be God. "I shaped You to my own image / Thinking You vicious, greedy and vain, ..." After pride the work of evil manifests in Lust for Power (Second Prayer), Hatred, Destruction (Third Prayer), Devastation, Misery (Fourth and Fifth Prayers), bad Education (ethical, moral stagnation: Sixth Prayer). To God's claim, destructive denial is the response. This second, 'intermediate part' raises the immediate possibility of complete destruction. However, the poems mediate gravity and responsibility, and not desperation or lethargy.

The good and the bad, the creator and the destructive powers are not equally powerful and the outcome of the fight depends on the man: it is the task of the *I* to emphasise (to himself, in particular, then to his environment) the success of the good, and this is the only way he can become similar to his creator. The third part, in Hegel's terms, is some kind of a synthesis. Although through creation, good opportunities arise; nevertheless, it is not consensus and goodness, but it is disharmony that rules. What shall be done now, what is to be desired and what is to be rejected? When shall we turn to God for help to be able to form our world actively? The third part in the poems are prayers for (God's) understanding, for making the world nicer and better (First Prayer), for peace (Second Prayer), for the cleaning of the heart (Third Prayer), for the elevating of life (Fourth Prayer), for co-operation with God (Fifth Prayer) and for the saving of the children (Sixth Prayer). In this formation process, acting in harmony with the absolute is the most important motive.

The topic of the Third Prayer or psalm⁶ is the conflict of the heart and the mind. This is a very ancient question in the history of thinking and it is

⁶ With reference to the Book of Psalms in the Bible, the author kept the name in the title: 'psalmus.' However, in the title of the other six poems, he uses the expression 'prayer.'

a very ancient idea to confront them. Earlier, in trying to define the relationship between the heart and the mind, the opinion was that the heart and the good originated from God, and the mind was their downright opposite. However, this view was more complicated in the scientist's mind. Lucifer himself was called the 'Light-bearer;' he was directly linked to the mind, to cold rationalism which was in contrast with naïve belief, the 'religion of the heart' (Rousseau, Kazinczy). The antagonist of the Three Angels is the 'ancient spirit of denial.'

In Szent-Györgyi's views, the mind loses its negative connotations (naturally), but he also recognises the limited nature of the mind's use and relevance (this is the reason for his worries about the immensely destructive nature of the latest scientific inventions). However, in his opinion, this is more of an ethical issue than a metaphysical or an epistemological one. In other words, it is ethics that must control the destructive consequences which might easily stem from the inventions of science. It is not the rebellious mind but the hateful heart that poisons the intellect.

Third Prayer: THE HEART AND THE MIND

My Lord!

*You have given me a heart capable of love and thirsty for love,
 You have given me a mind capable of clear thought and creativeness,
 And I have filled my heart with fear and hatred,
 And my heart corrupts my mind and makes it build monstrous instruments
 of murder
 To destroy Your world, myself and my fellow men,
 And damage the sacred stuff life is made of.
 God! Clean my heart, lift my mind,
 And make me my brother's brother.*

In 1964, an eternal and agonizing problem Szent-Györgyi was struggling with emerged to the surface through his poems. The improvement of public

While the former is about the direct relationship between God and the poetic *I*, the latter one has a determinant element, the *world* which has been misdirected. To be able to make order once more, Szent-Györgyi turns to God for help. David's psalmic attitude was replaced by that of a priest's. It is notable how *the Lord* and *God* alternate.

ethics cannot keep abreast with the science he was fighting so fiercely for. A dangerous consequence of this situation may be the destruction of the most important value, of life ("*damage the sacred stuff life is made of*"). The different pace of development of the different forms of consciousness threatens with the destruction of the *whole*. Learning something new does not always entail only the good and the useful but also the dangerous: while man was busy building his 'societies,' he lost his genuine, 'divine' goodness. Moreover, ethics has remained unchanged for the millennia of man's existence. Even civilised societies have remained unchanged from this aspect: barbaric killing, the right of the strongest i.e. unlawfulness have prevailed.

To these dangers, Szent-Györgyi reacted in, essentially, two ways. One way is the changing of the society's structure, the bringing of the idea of a cosmopolite into existence; and the other way, from the individual's point of view, is elevation to a higher ethical level. For the moment, either way is a *pium desiderium*.

Consequently, the content of the Second Prayer is quite obvious from the above. The first part (the thesis) narrates the present situation: the order of the world and the system of electing politicians to deal with public duties and spiritual leaders to serve God. However, in the second part of the prayer, he writes that all, even those who should act in the name of God, are driven by one desire: lust for power instead of working for peace. The representatives of the church provoke killing instead of practising their original duties. He is asking for God's help to send leaders, both physically and spiritually, who can lead humanity to achieve the most important value: peace.

The fourth and fifth prayers are focussing, continuing with the three-part arrangement, on scientific research, on the scholar struggling with conducting these researches. The thesis and antithesis of either poem is similar: we were given a beautiful, rich land and a human sense able to understand and influence this land; however, with our guns, we have brought misery and destruction to our fellow creatures ("*build them into formidable machines of destruction*") – the antithesis. The *We* is unable to reconcile this conflict, to perform the task. On the one hand, he turns to God for help to forbid destruction for humans ("*Let me not destroy the temple of life,*" Fourth Prayer), and on the other hand, he needs God to allow us to become companions to him in the building of life ("*Let us be Your partners in creation,*" Fifth Prayer). A man can become God's *analogue* by activity and not by remaining in our given situation. The opportunity given by this *resemblance* can be fulfilled only if man becomes a *companion* together with all the dangers this distinguished status poses.

The final prayer is for the children. Some positive characteristic features already cited (pleasure, wealth and harmony) are emphasised once more; moreover, two fundamental Christian values are placed above them: *peace* and *love*. This new salvation must be based on these values. These thoughts remind us to Mihály Babits' World War I poems entitled '*God, Our Father*' and '*Before Easter*.' Babits wrote the gospel paraphrase for a *print* on war orphans. The poem's intention is to make us believe that suffering and the death of the relatives were not in vain, because, as the poem says, "sooner or later dominion and glory will be his (God's)." In Szent-Györgyi's poem, this same wish is formed.

Babits' Hungarian words, "...gyermekéinket / növeld békére: ha bűn, hogy lábunk / ma vérbe csuszik: értük az!" can be translated as "... our children / enhance peace in them; if our feet / shall imbue with blood, it is for them." In Szent-Györgyi's poem in English, the same wish is expressed in the following way:

"Save their lives

That the weapons I forge against others may not destroy them,"

Albert Szent-Györgyi: *Psalmus Humanus*

My Lord, Who are You?
 Are You my stern Father,
 Or are You my loving Mother
 In whose womb the Universe was born?
 Are You the Universe itself?
 Or the Law which rules it?
 Have You created life only to wipe it out again?
 Are You my maker, or did I shape You,
 That I may share my loneliness and shun my responsibility?
 God! I don't know who You are
 But I am calling to You, for I am in trouble,
 Frightened of myself and my fellow men!
 You may not understand my words,
 But comprehend my wordless sounds.
First Prayer: God
 My Lord! You are greater than the world You created,
 And Your house is the Universe.
 I shaped You to my own image
 Thinking You vicious, greedy and vain,

Desirous of my praise and sacrifices,
Revengeful of my petty trespasses,
Needful of the houses I build you
While my fellow men I let go without food and shelter.
God! Let me praise You by improving my corner of Your Creation

By filling this little world of mine

With light, warmth, good will and happiness.

...

Fourth Prayer: Energy and Speed

My Lord!

You have revealed to us the secret energies of matter
To ease our toil and elevate life,
You have taught us to travel faster than the sound we make
That distance should no more separate man from man.
We toil to press these energies into shells
In which to send them to the distant corners of the earth,
To bring misery and destruction to our fellow men,
Leaving the earth scorched and barren of life.
God! Let me not destroy the temple of life,
Let me use my knowledge to my advantage, to elevate life,
Lend dignity to the short span of my existence.
Lend dignity to the short span of my existence.

Fifth Prayer: The Earth

My Lord! You have given us this lovely globe to live on,
Hidden untold treasures in its bowels,
Enabled us to comprehend Your work,
Ease our toil, ban hunger and disease.
We are digging up those treasures to squander them,
To build them into formidable machines of destruction,
With which to destroy what other men have built
Which will turn against me, destroy me and my children.

God! Let us be Your partners in creation
By understanding and improving Your work,
Making this globe of ours a safe home
For wealth, happiness and harmony.